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A Tale Of Two Women: The Military, Wives, and Careers

by Jacey Skillman and Paulla Estes

When *Service Etiquette* was first printed, I imagine it did cover many of the subjects a young wife needed to know. The military then was one of white gloves, calling cards and fitness reports for wives. But you and I are dealing with a much different military, one that is experiencing tremendous growing pains, particularly where the role of women is concerned.

Today, there are military women graduating from the Naval Academy and flying jets in combat. Well-educated young wives don't just want to bask in the reflected glory of their husbands' careers, but want glorious (or at least satisfying) careers of their own. New rules seem to come into play overnight, and guidebooks to steer us through the maze of the military are few and far between.

In 1990, Betty Alt and Bonnie Stone published *Uncle Sam's Brides: The World of Military Wives* to very good reviews. This well-documented book used hundreds of interviews and scientific studies to try to give an accurate picture of the women who are, in essence, married to the military.

In the chapter devoted to having a career, they gild no lilies. According to the authors, military wives face four barriers when looking for a job: "companies hire from the local population, thereby freezing out military wives; promotions are from within, leaving mostly entry-level jobs for military wives as well as other applicants; major bases are located in isolated areas far from employment centers and their employees are mostly local hires; and military brass consistently 'suggest' that senior officers' wives not work (p. 151)."

If you don't like this situation, the choices that Alt and Stone leave open to career women are grim. They say you can have "a long-distance marriage with the husband going alone to his next assignment, a decision by the husband to get out of the service, or divorce."

These are bleak words. The picture they paint of unhappy wives who are continually

moved from one entry-level job to another only to have someone "suggest" that they not work once they reach the senior level, is hard to accept.

Is that the real picture? Is that the kind of life you and I have to look forward to? If you believe everything you read, you might fall into the depths of despair at the gloomy outlook these authors present. It may look like you will never get any job satisfaction or status of your own if you stay married to the military man you have now. However, as Thoreau wrote, "Don't read to believe or disbelieve, but to weigh and consider."

Consider that one of the problems we experience as wives is that there aren't any apparent role models for us to emulate. The military has changed so much in the past fifteen years that the services are nearly unrecognizable.

"All too often in the busy daily routine of being a housewife--and a woman should be proud of these titles which are the most demanding of all--it is easy to let yourself go. For these busy, but sometimes careless women, here are some tips: Don't wear hair curlers in public. If you must go to the commissary after shampooing, wear a scarf over those pink sausages."

--*Service Etiquette*, p.417

Since we live and work with others in our peer group, we don't often see the wives who have made it through twenty or more years of a military marriage. These are women who can at least offer us some perspective about how their careers developed and where they think our careers are going.

At NPS, we are fortunate to know Rosemary Toft and Marianne Roser who both appear to have managed to balance their commitments to their military husbands and their obligation to themselves. They are both very active in the community and most of their children are either in college or have graduated. They have different work histo-

ries, but both appear to be satisfied with their career paths now.

When Rosemary started working, she had little paid work experience but had volunteered extensively. According to Rosemary "if you have worked in the various offices of the Wives Club, you know you can manage the office of a small business. The skills are the same." She took a job as an office manager/bookkeeper in a florist shop and devoted herself to learning all the details particular to that kind of store. During the next two transfers, she set out to get the same kind of job in a different florist shop. She found her specialized skills were transferable and made her more marketable each time she moved.

After being transferred to Monterey, she took a job as an administrative assistant at MPC as a temp. Rosemary was already known in the office by another Navy wife as well as by an acquaintance from ten years before. When the position became a permanent one, Rosemary had already proven herself with solid managerial skills. She is now very satisfied with her work since it involves working closely with students on financial and course scheduling as well as the office and bookkeeping tasks from past jobs.

Rosemary says that "some educated young wives are discouraged by seeing their careers fail to progress. They have to be ready to take a job below their skills in the beginning until they have a proven track record. That's a hurdle you just have to get over."

After Marianne Roser got a job she enjoyed with Bank of America in 1981, she found her husband's orders to Japan a hard hurdle to just "get over." She was building seniority in her job and hoped to be promoted.

When they moved to Virginia from Japan the following year, she walked into First Virginia Bank, offered her services, and they hired her on the spot as a customer service representative. In three years, she

received two promotions and doubled her salary. For the first time she thought "Hey, I can take care of myself!" It was a heady notion.

Marianne hated to leave her job as Training Officer when her husband got orders again. She confesses to being angry about it, but told herself to get her priorities in line. She and her husband decided that his salary had the better potential to support the family. She moved to Alameda with him and put her talents into many volunteer activities and continuing to support his career.

Marianne and Rosemary are not easily stereotyped. They don't quite fit into Alt and Stone's Unhappy Wife pattern. Nor would they be considered high-powered executives in the eyes of the world. But why do these two women seem so satisfied with their choices?

By thinking and planning, Rosemary and Marianne have both found ways to fulfill their ambitions. Whether by having a career job or through volunteer work, these two women and their husbands have found satisfaction despite the rigors of military life.

In their book, Alt and Stone fail to give any credence to the fact that the women they studied, like Rosemary and Marianne, are not only capable of having serious careers, but are also capable of making informed decisions. Any time she wants to, a military wife can pack her bags and go. She isn't the one who has signed up to be in the military. She can't go AWOL.

The sacrifices we spouses make to have good marriages go both ways. Our husbands give as much as they take. Nevertheless, in the question of careers, wives will always give more simply because maintaining a career while moving every two or three years is difficult. We military wives have chosen our own husbands, and for most of us this means that part of the man we love is his dedication to the military.

Take heart. Spouses like Rosemary and Marianne have struggled with being wives, mothers and workers for years. Service Etiquette will someday have a whole chapter devoted to the spouse's job. It will deal with a myriad of topics from how to behave at your wife's office party to how to encourage her when the job isn't going so well. It will happen. Until then we will stick it out and blaze a whole new trail for the wives who will come after us.



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